

that's what friends are for by jibberjabber599

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Summary:

It's this action that seems to make his presence a welcome one when Dustin drags him around, even though he'd like to remind the little rugrats that he's the one who got them out of that hole and saved their lives. Steve doesn't really have a reference point when it comes to being a big brother—he's an only child, never really willingly hung out with anyone younger than him—but he's pretty sure it must feel a little something like this.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

this was written super quickly, likely contains mistakes and may be ooc, but i had to write a little something to get out my feels of steve as the new babysitter. title is from dionne warwick's that's what friends are for.

Steve is aware he's not exactly known for planning out his future all that well. Hell, he'd never really *had* to.

He's always coasted through life, dealt with stuff whenever they came at him rather than worrying to any capacity about the future. That philosophy had served him well until he asked Nancy Wheeler out his junior year.

His life seemed to get turned on its head after that, to everything from actually cramming for tests instead of making out with girls and using studying as an excuse to alien monster things he actively tried to avoid thinking about the existence of on the daily. He fell in love —*hard*—and put effort (or *tried*) in school, focused on the normal parts of senior year and pretended everything was normal.

But if anyone had told him a few weeks ago that he'd be playing chauffeur for Dustin Henderson and babysitter for his group of friends? He'd have laughed in their faces.

After encountering those demo-*whatevers* twice (two more times than he ever wanted), he really shouldn't be fazed by much of anything.

Yet here he was, willingly allowing himself to be roped into refereeing a bike race for the munchkins—a nickname that he's found annoys them infinitely more than "shitheads"—and it's something he never imagined doing a few weeks prior, much less would have planned.

He doesn't mind all that much, really, when the kids ended up being a welcome distraction, what with graduation months away but still looming like a dark cloud over him. Not to mention his love life swirling down the drain. He didn't hold a grudge against Nancy or Jonathan, he knew a person couldn't exactly help who they fell in love with. But he makes it a point to never go around the Wheeler's house unless it's necessary, only because he'd rather not make an ass of himself by pining away like a lovesick puppy.

"What's this race for, anyway?" he'd asked Dustin on the drive over, after they'd loaded his bike in the back.

"Our party has more diverse interests now," Dustin begins, "Mike always wants to hang out with Eleven alone, but Hopper doesn't really allow that. Lucas always follows Max around, and Max always wants to be at the arcade or skateboarding. We unanimously decided this was the best way to determine who gets to choose what we do."

"So, whoever wins the race fair-and-square gets to decide what your group does for the day?"

He'd pulled his eyes away from the road to find Dustin grinning at him, clearly confident in his ability to win. "Precisely."

The rest of the kids are already there when they arrive. Dustin still has a small crush on Max, he can tell, and it's ridiculous how he feels comradery with the kid, in the same boat. The two younger couples are perpetually googly-eyed over each other—but Mike also pays special attention to his best friend, like he's afraid Will might vanish before his eyes. Him and Eleven are intense for their age, and Steve still can't decide whether that's strange or admirable, how much they openly adore each other. Lucas is enamored by Max, Steve always catching him stealing glances at the redhead when she's not paying attention, but she returns that affection in equal measure through teasing and taunts she doesn't bother giving to anyone else.

Dustin announces Steve will determine the winner, and they all set off. Hopper had purchased a bike for Eleven, but she's still a little wobbly despite them diligently teaching her, not quite ready for a race. She opts to sit behind Mike, both smiling when she clutches the fabric of his jacket. Max follows suit, ditching her skateboard in the grass beside where Steve stands, returning his smile before running off to settle behind Lucas.

(He'd noticed her broken skateboard a couple of weeks ago, how she'd attempted to mend it with tape, could easily take a gander at who was the culprit. Likely some twisted form of punishment for her hanging out with Lucas, and well, Steve *did* owe the girl a small bit. After all, she'd managed to jab horse tranquilizer into her brother before Steve's brains managed to leak out of his nose from another blow to his face. His face was still discolored, painful and sore.

She'd eyed the skateboard skeptically when he'd held it out, brows arched and lips pursed as if trying to figure out if he had ulterior motives. If the situation hadn't been so bizarre from the get-go, he'd be offended.

“Think of it as a thank you. Don’t let him break this one,” he had warned. “I’ll even let you borrow my bat again if you need it.”

That had made her crack a grin.)

It’s this action that seems to make his presence a welcome one when Dustin drags him around, even though he’d like to remind the little rugrats that he’s the one who got them out of that hole and saved their lives. Steve doesn’t really have a reference point when it comes to being a big brother—he’s an only child, never really willingly hung out with anyone younger than him—but he’s pretty sure it must feel a little something like this.

“Okay, are you ready?” he yells out when they’re all in place, and a chorus of “ready!” echoes across the distance. “Ready, set, go!”

They all are pretty much neck and neck the first few seconds before Will gets a lead on them, his legs peddling furiously. He’s pretty sure it’s Dustin who yells out, “Son of a bitch!” at one point.

Will wins by a small margin, and Steve calls it as he sees it. They’re fine with who the winner is, yielding with resigned nods as they catch their breath, but a disagreement quickly ensues when they turn to him and ask who made it in second.

His brow furrows as he takes in their eager expressions. “I thought only the winner gets to decide what the group activity will be?”

“Yeah,” Lucas answers, slowly, like he’s speaking to a child. “But we still want to know who came in second. It was me, right?”

“It’s the principle of the matter,” Mike explains as the girls slip off the back seats. “And it wasn’t you, it was me and El!”

“Bullshit, it was me!” Dustin interjects.

Eleven and Max share a look of what Steve can only call judgement as they roll their eyes at the boys’ antics.

He can’t say he blames them all that much—he forgot how competitive kids that age could be over the tiniest thing. But then Dustin turns to him with a look of desperation that tells him to play along, silently begging and relying on Steve to call it.

“Uh, well,” he stalls, the girls coming over to stand by him and Will. No matter who he claims came in second, they’re going to challenge it, so, “It was a tie. You all are first runner-up. Congratulations.”

That sparks instant shouts of denial about how that’s impossible, how it was his job to determine what rank everyone came in.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair, knowing the last time he tried to insert himself into a conversation they’d tuned him out (and that had been a life or death situation not a measly bike race), deciding the best thing to do is let them duke it out on their own.

Max grabs her skateboard before walking off, Eleven in tow, and, well, he is sort-of responsible for these kids, and demands to know where they're going. Plus, he'd rather not be left alone with a bunch of thirteen-year-old boys demanding to know who the winner is with all their nerdy references he never gets.

"Max is teaching me how to skateboard," Eleven answers simply.

"Oh, well, be careful," he cautions lamely, but it's drowned out by Mike and Lucas asking where the girls are going.

Well, I guess your girlfriends ditching you is one way to end an argument, Steve muses with a grin.

Eleven repeats herself, with a warmer tone to Mike than she had with him, and Lucas insists on tagging along while Max taunts that he can *only* if he can keep up.

Except...

"Hey, hey, hey!" Steve yells out before they can go off, succeeding in getting their attention, hands on his hips. "Here you all were fighting over who got second place, when Will won. He gets to choose what everyone does." They all grumble but acknowledge that he's right, trudging back over with slumped shoulders. "Tough luck kids, I don't make the rules—you did."

And just as quickly as the debate over who arrived in second place began, it's dropped, Mike slinging an arm over Will's shoulders when he decides they should go to Mike's house and play Dungeons and Dragons.

Max mutters something about not knowing anything about that (Steve can relate), before Lucas nudges her shoulder with his, promising to teach her everything.

Steve watches as Dustin nearly invites him along before catching himself, knowing that not only is he not too interested in knowing the ends and outs of Dungeons and Dragons, but Nancy might be around.

Smart kid.

"You need a ride home later?" he offers before they can all ride off.

"Nah," Dustin declines, starting off before hollering back something about how Steve could drive him to the arcade tomorrow, though.

Dustin still owed him from last week, when Steve had emptied out his pockets and let Dustin hunt around his car for spare change.

Steve planned on driving the kid there anyway.

2. all around the campfire

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you so much for the kudos and comments, i adored them all! i'm glad it's just a collective agreement on the internet that dad!steve was one of the best parts of season two. i wrote this right after writing the first chapter, and thought i might as well add it in.

The kids are dead-set on going camping before the first snowfall of winter.

Hopper, who was extremely busy with handling the aftermath of everything, suggested waiting until late summer or next fall, had even offered to be the one to take them all. But, according to Dustin, who regaled Steve with the account of the conversation, the kids had fervently denied waiting that long. Both Ms. Byers and the Chief were understandably reluctant to allow them too far out of sight or reach quite so soon, forbidding them to go on some impromptu camping trip alone.

So, Dustin had evidently volunteered *him* as the chaperone.

He'd like to mention that Jonathan and Nancy are easily capable enough to fill the chaperoning shoes on one of the afternoons they're all gathered at the Byers' residence, him tagging along to see how the repairing was going and maybe lend a hand. But Steve truly *does* have a difficult time turning them down.

Not that Mike or the others appear nearly enthused as Dustin is about the prospect of Steve being in charge on this camping trip, but *still*.

“You did manage to keep us safe under life-threatening circumstances while concussed, so this should be relatively simple in comparison,” Dustin reminds him with cajoling grin, showing off his pearly whites.

Like Steve really *needs* reminding, recalling how the rest of that night had passed by in a painful blur, how the relief and adrenaline faded and throbbing ache had set in. If they all hadn’t just barely escaped the clutches of death by monsters (or in his case specifically, a psychotic, raging asshole’s fists), he might’ve been slightly amused by the rainbow bandages that he’d slowly peeled away when he’d finally gone home.

He agrees and goes along with it, as long as they compromise with him on one thing: they’ll camp out in Steve’s backyard. It’s mostly for the sake of his own sanity, as he’d rather not be out in the middle of the woods and far away from a phone if he can help it. Steve had been a boy scout for a few years, hoping he’d retained some of what he’d learned, but he didn’t really think there was anything special about camping.

Plus, there were potentially dozens of ways he could imagine this going wrong. His backyard felt like the safest option. They all grumble—“this isn’t an authentic camping trip!”—but end up conceding.

Besides, he has a sneaking suspicion that they’ll cave before the night is close to over, deciding it’s too chilly outside and too-cramped in tents. He can already hear them now, complaining about how so-and-so kicked them or so-and-so keeps farting. They could instead camp out in his living room, maybe watching a VHS. He plans it on the weekend his parents happen to be out of town, and he can’t believe

what had once been a golden opportunity to invite friends over for underage drinking and other shenanigans has now turned into a weekend of him freely babysitting six munchkins.

“Which one of you dudes decided to go camping, anyway?”

“The *dude* was me,” Max replies, shrugging her shoulders. “Lucas said it was fun and I’ve never been.”

“Eleven’s never been either,” Will chimes in, sharing a soft smile with the girl.

“Yeah, but didn’t she wander around the woods before Hopper kept her in a cabin out in the middle of nowhere? What?” he asks defensively when they all turn to glare at him. “It’s almost the same thing or concept or whatever.”

Mike looks as if he’d like to march up to Steve and deck him, so Steve makes an act of zipping his lips and throwing away the imaginary key.

Dustin and Lucas have the largest bags of the group strapped to their backs and Steve had made what he thought was a hilarious joke earlier about them looking prepared to survive an apocalypse. They’d remained stony-faced and he might’ve mumbled something about a tough crowd.

“It never hurts to be prepared,” Lucas had responded, pulling out his

binoculars and slingshot, and well, Steve gets *that*.

It's why he kept the bat in the trunk of his car, always on hand.

"Okay, we need to gather wood and pitch the tents while it's still light out," he squints down at his watch. "And we only have about an hour."

They all get to work, Lucas and Will assembling one tent as Max tries to assist them, while Mike pitches another alone, explaining his every action to an observant Eleven. Dustin busies himself by grabbing every twig he can find.

"I'm kinda jealous of your little group," he confesses. "Or *party*. Try not to let high school ruin what you guys have going on."

He doesn't have any proper advice or wisdom to instill on how to keep their friendships in-tact, just to continue to have each other's backs.

"Aw, Steve, don't feel jealous. We can induct you in as another member if you'd like," Dustin pats his shoulder, beaming at him from under his baseball cap.

Maybe traumatizing bullshit *did* oddly connect you with those you experienced the events alongside, because Steve finds himself feeling touched by the comment. Or, as touched as he can feel when the tent he just assembled, collapses.

He whirls around to see if the kids had witnessed it, and finds them practically gawking at his (lack-of) skills.

“Didn’t you say you were once a Boy Scout?” Mike asks, one of his brows arched, the judgement rolling off of him in waves.

“I don’t know why I put up with you shitheads,” he mutters, still failing at getting the stupid tent set up, falling flat the second he thinks its stable. And yeah, he might be aggravated Mike and Lucas pitched their tents with no issues. Maybe his is defective.

Dustin pushes him aside when he goes in for another attempt.

“Because you’re fond of us,” Eleven’s voice rings out, everyone’s heads swiveling in her direction. “Fond: having an affection or liking for,” she recites, and Steve vaguely remembers Dustin sharing that Eleven learned a new word every day, in addition to being introduced to books they picked out for her at the library.

It’s the most words Steve has ever heard her utter in one singular sentence, to him at least. “Yeah, yeah, fond. I’d be even more fond of you if you used your mind powers to help me get this tent up and fire started,” he jokes, and he swears the girl cracks a smile even while Mike is offended on her behalf.

“No way!” the boy protests. “Even if El *did* do that, we wouldn’t be getting the full experience.”

An hour later they're settled around the campfire, Steve tuning them out automatically after the third D&D reference, but humors them by nodding every few words.

"We can lend you the player handbook if you'd like," Will offers from beside of him, and there's something about Will Byers—entirely unrelated to the traumatic shit the kid had been through the past two years—that makes disappointing him incredibly tough.

"Uh, it'd probably go over my head," is the nicest way he can refuse. It happens to also be the truth.

"Don't you mean your *hair*?" Lucas quips, Max making a choking noise next to him before the whole group bursts into laughter.

Even Eleven is full-on grinning. "Farrah Fawcett spray," she says, pulling a strand of her hair up and mimicking the act of spraying it, and it's easy to see she was filled in on *that* early after reconnecting with the group.

The sound of Dustin's laughter dies and Steve can feel the little shit freeze on the other side of him.

"This is how you repay me for emptying my pockets and driving you to the arcade to play your dorky little games?" And if he sounds a little betrayed, who can blame him?

Didn't these kids always ramble on about codes or some shit, anyway? What about the code of honor?

"L-listen, Steve, buddy, in my defense we make a proactive effort to not keep secrets," he stammers, turning to the group. "Let's cease and desist with any future comments about his hair."

Steve has to roll his eyes. "Relax, Henderson. What's next on the to-do list?"

"I want to make smores," Max grins, bouncing in anticipation, arguably more excited than Steve's witnessed in the past month of supervising the munchkins. "I've never had one."

Dustin grabs his backpack, jerking it open before dumping the contents on the ground, announcing he has the supplies to make that happen.

Will quietly eats two while Lucas prepares one for Max and himself, both giggling between every bite. Mike eats the one Eleven nibbled on when she decides she likes roasting marshmallows alone more than smores, plucking them one by one from the bag. Dustin manages to drop his on the ground before claiming the five-second rule made it safe and shoving it all in his mouth.

To top the night off, they then decide to split into pairs, choosing which tent to sleep in. Steve watches in stunned, flabbergasted silence as Mike, Will and Eleven take the biggest tent and Lucas and Max take the other.

It's a given that Dustin has chosen him as his sleeping partner, of course, since the girl he still sort-of likes (no matter how many times he denies it) has been holding Lucas' hand under the blanket all evening. These kids are *not* slick.

"Hey!" He claps his hands together for good measure, the sound echoing in the darkness, gesturing wildly at kids and the plan they'd cooked up. One that he was intent on thwarting *right now*. He's pretty sure they thought he's hip and cool and would be down with the sleep cuddling that would inevitably occur.

But he's also pretty damn sure Hopper would personally shoot his ass if he allowed Eleven to stay in a tent alone with Mike, even if technically Will was in it, too. "Listen, you guys wanna pair off with your girlfriends, I get it, but that's not happening on my watch."

They all have a prepared rebuttal—how they *aren't* dating, how he's being *super* unfair, how he would *totally* do the same thing too.

He snaps his fingers at the last excuse. "You're exactly right, I would, and that's why it's not happening. Boys in one tent and girls in the other." They stand in front of the openings of the tents for a few seconds, like they're weighing whether or not they'll get their way if they argue. He doesn't want to resort to it, but, "Unless you all would like to gather 'round the campfire for a little story I like to call, The Birds and the Bees."

That sparks an instant response of "Gross! Disgusting! No way!" and furious head shaking, Lucas darting away from Max like she's on fire to stand by what Steve now designates the Boys Tent.

But Eleven stands there, blinking at them before repeating, “The birds and the bees?”

Apparently, that hadn’t been a topic broached by the Chief yet, and well, Steve’s not exactly in a rush to steal *that* honor from the man.

(The boys and Max aren’t, either.)

“Sorry, kid, you’ll have to ask Hopper about that. Or Ms. Byers. Time for bed.”

They waste no time settling into the tents then. But somehow, and Steve’s not exactly sure how, they all end up shuffling inside the biggest tent. He can’t even shift comfortably in his sleeping bag, his hair and face squashed up against the fabric of the tent, the sound of the even breathing of six kids filling the air when they somehow manage to drift off.

And of course, they inevitably end up cuddling into each other’s sides for added warmth, Dustin even latching onto his back, his snores directly in Steve’s ear.

It’s uncomfortable and he’s not getting a wink of sleep, but he’s willing to admit that he counts the night as a success.

Author's Note:

steve bought a camera for jonathan, i choose to

believe he's the type of dude who would buy max a new skateboard and give dustin change for the arcade.